

**UNLEARNING THE GIVEN. Exercises in Demodernity and Decoloniality
of Ideas and Knowledge**

**A Performative, Discursive and Corporeal Curatorial Framework
for *The Long Night of Ideas***

- CONCEPT -

April 14th, 2016

6pm - Midnight | Lectures and Performances

Midnight- 6am | DJ Sets

"On his deathbed, Copernicus published the book that founded modern astronomy. Three centuries before, Arab scientists Mu'ayyad al-Din al-'Urdu and Nasir al-Din Tusi had come up with the theorems crucial to that development. Copernicus used their theorems but did not cite the source. Europe looked in the mirror and saw the world. Beyond that lay nothing. The three inventions that made the Renaissance possible, the compass, gunpowder, and the printing press, came from China. The Babylonians scooped Pythagoras by fifteen hundred years. Long before anyone else, the Indians knew the world was round and had calculated its age. And better than anyone else, the Mayans knew the stars, eyes of the night, and the mysteries of time. Such details were not worthy of Europe's attention."

*Eduardo Galeano, MIRRORS – Stories of Almost Everyone*¹

THE IDEA OF INVENTING THIS WORLD

In this anecdotal and (thought-) provoking statement, Galeano essentially points out, with a keen sense of perspective, the discrepancies between what is and what it seems, real and constructed facts, what is supposed to be taught and what is taught, as well as what should be learned and what should be unlearned. With *Euro Everything*, he seeks to address the phenomena of erasure, active and passive silencing and quenching of cultures, histories and knowledges also inherent to Modernism. These phenomena are the shadows that arise from the spotlight that is shone on and that will always accompany Modernism and its aftermaths.

It is self-evident that the dominant Western and Eurocentric educational structure intimately supports racist power structures and knowledge systems, which continue to measure the

¹ Galeano, Eduardo: "Euro Everything." In *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, 2009

progress of other cultures in terms of their “distance” from Western modernity. It is under this ideology of progress that colonialism was immediately justified, deeming certain societies not yet ready for self-rule and consigning them to the “waiting room of history”², and this continues to be facilitated in the labelling of parts of the world as “developing”, according to their ability to impersonate Western “progress”.

Spat out in the world, we are immediately subjected to processes of learning, and slowly - unavoidably and irrevocably - moulded by social conventions, paradigms, ideologies, schemas, and by an innumerable list of acquired preconceptions that soon enough represent the skeleton of our moral system and superego. Continuing on our path of maturation along a universal qua Western educational system that has found or forced its way into almost all four corners, and nooks and crannies of the globe, we become learned subjects inserted in a perverse role-playing game as political bodies subject to capitalist endeavours and capitalism’s straightjacket.

Along the line in the quest for power and progress in the sciences and humanities, economics and military, and in an effort to colonise space and time, those references and resources of civilisations, discoveries and innovations from the non-West – that paved the way to what one now calls a Western civilisation – were sacrificed, left out, disputed or deleted, and covered by other knowledge constructs and philosophies that claimed or propagated racial, humanitarian, economic, historical superiority for some kinds of human beings and not for others. These ideologies have been the pillars on which slavery, colonialism, neoliberal economics, anti-semitism, anti-islamism, racism have been built. These need to be unlearned.

THE IDEA OF ‘DAS VOLK’

In the wake of an increased racism in Germany, and a rise in violent attacks against foreigners, especially refugees, in Europe as a whole;

At a time when we experience the rebirth or reconceptualization of nationalistic tendencies in Hungary, Poland, Denmark, France, Italy and Germany;

In the dawn of an era in which refugee homes are burnt down (according to statistics of *Kein Mensch ist Illegal* in 2015 alone 1005 arsons on refugee homes were registered, as compared to 199 in 2014, and 69 in 2013), while citizens of a ‘civilized’ nation stand around hindering the work of the firefighters, cheering and clapping and chanting “refugees go home,” and “Wir Sind das Volk” (we are the people)³;

What about an age of refugeeness in which refugees, like in Clausnitz, Germany, are brought to a new asylum home in a bus and met by a group of ca 100 neo-Nazis chanting “Wir sind das Volk”. Instead of the police protecting the helpless refugees, the police pulled them out using massive force and left them there at the mercy of a bunch of neo-nazis⁴?

Besides and beyond unlearning the construction of race, the construction of the ‘other’ – who

² Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, 2000, pp. 8-10

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/21/crowd-cheers-fire-hotel-refugee-shelter-saxony-germany>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/mob-chanting-bus-refugees-germany-politicians>

according to popular discourse leaves his/her home and family, walks across the desert or swims across the Mediterranean sea, succeeds in overcoming all the violent hurdles from Greece through Hungary to Germany, just to take away the jobs, wealth and rape women in Germany, one too has to unlearn that perverse concept of a unilateral Volk.

Despite the historical baggage the word *Volk* brings along, especially in relation to Nazi Germany, it is time to appropriate the concept of Volk and give it new meaning, instead of discarding it. That is unlearning. The discourse around Hans Haacke's work "Der Bevölkerung," which is still vivid in our memories, though it was one of the most important art pieces of the 20th century has to be reconsidered 16 years after. Haacke's position with his history and with the piece in the Reichstag is very legitimate, but with 1,1 million refugees seeking for greener and safer pastures in Germany, and with 1 of 5 Germans having a 'Migrationsvordergrund,' we have to change the debate, change the narrative and change perspectives. The Volk should not and NEVER could it afford to exclude all these people. We all know that the construct of *Das Volk* as the Nazis wanted to see it was a sheer fiction. There has NEVER been a singular, uniform, coherent or homogenous *Deutsche Volk*. Never. This construct called Deutsch/ German is made up of the Bavarians, Preussians, Saxons, Bohemians, Danes, etc.⁵ and today, as well as tomorrow it will mean Syrians, Iranians, Ghanians, Nigerians, Moroccans and more, including gays and lesbians, men and women, the sane and insane. The idea of a homogenous, blond and blue-eyed Aryan German too has to be unlearned. Thus unlearning is not shying away or chickening out of reality, but pointing at, deconstructing and complexifying those myths and longings of the nation state, the supreme race and other fabrications.

THE IDEA OF UNLEARNING

Upon an invitation by the Auswärtiges Amt to participate in the 'Long Night of Ideas,' *SAVVY Contemporary* is proposing the challenge of 'unlearning the given,' and of deconstructing the ideologies and connotations eminent to the constructs that frame our societies today. The proposal is unlearning as an inherent part of learning or a process of carving out space for more ideas.

With a series of performative interventions, lectures, artistic contributions from 6pm till Midnight and 6 DJ-sets from Midnight till 6am, we aim at articulating exercises of disobedience and indiscipline as an attempt and a means of decolonising the singularity of "knowledge", challenging not only the level of the individual but also the systemic problems, and giving space to the possibility of a plurality of epistemologies. We also aim at putting a spotlight on corpoliteracy⁶ as a form of learning, i.e. bodily knowledge, experientiality and performativity as means of unlearning, but also acquiring, enacting and disseminating knowledge. Along the very well known and resonating words and researches of Gayatri Spivak, we will focus on the fundamental process of "Unlearning one's privileges as one's

⁵ <http://www.zeit.de/2015/44/deutsche-abstammung-migration-geschichte-mittelalter-johannes-fried>

⁶ with the concept of corpoliteracy I mean to contextualise the body as a platform and medium of learning, a structure or organ that acquires, stores and disseminates knowledge. This concept would imply that the body, in sync, but also independent of the brain, has the potential of memorizing and passing on/ down acquired knowledge through performativity.

loss". She states that our privileges, whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, or gender may prevent us from gaining a certain kind of Other knowledge: not simply information that we have not yet received, but the knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions. To "unlearn" one's privilege is a vital step that marks the beginning of an ethical relation to the Other. On this journey, *SAVVY Contemporary* engages in what Paget Henry would call the poetic power of artistic practice to un-name and re-name, de-institute and re-institute selves, lower the volume of imposed voices and un-silence suppressed voices in an effort to resolve crisis of entrapment⁷.

Unlearning is not forgetting, it is not deletion, cancellation nor burning off. It is writing bolder and writing anew. It is commenting and questioning. It is giving new footnotes to old and other narratives. It is the wiping off of the dust, clearing of the grass, and cracking off the plaster that lays above the erased. Unlearning is flipping the coin and awakening the ghosts. Unlearning is looking in the mirror and seeing the world, rather than a concept of universalism that indeed purports a hegemony of knowledge.

⁷ Henry, Paget: Ramabai Espinet and Indo-Caribbean Poeticism. In *Shifting the Geography of Knowledge*.